

Salt and Light Plenary Session: Building Bridges by Organizing Hope

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Regency Ballroom (bottom floor of Hyatt Regency Washington) 400 New Jersey Ave. NW,
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I am very honored to address the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering organized by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in this Jubilee Year Twenty Twenty-Five.

It is a coincidence, but I stayed here on my very first visit to DC on my birthday in December 2003. If you had told me then that I would be returning twenty one years later as the Curial representative of an Argentine Pope, who at that time was my Archbishop, I would have been amazed. I am amazed now.

This hotel is close to the Capitol. It is appropriate that this gathering be here, so close to the center of representation for those whom the Holy Father referred to last Monday as the “Beloved American people”. It is appropriate because it is impossible to speak about hope without link with politics and economy. Why? Because: on the one hand, the theological virtue of hope is the dynamo that turns fear into organizing community. On the other hand, the “Jubilee of Hope” is in relationship with the message for the World Day of Peace 2025, where Pope Francis calls for “reducing or forgiving public debt”, and to do that it is necessary to organize hope to fix public debt as one of the main causes of poverty and migration. That is what I want to talk to you about. To talk about these couples: hope-organizing/ debt-migration/ economy-politic/ theology-Ideology. If we mixt it, we can read the reality, and, as we know: reality is superior to the idea.

A month ago the Jubilee of Hope started, and five days ago was the inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America. An inauguration often heralds a honeymoon of hope. However, there is an air of unrest, because catholic social workers feel that they are being called to supernatural effort. But, as Jesus Christ says, “Do not be afraid”; because “as where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more” -San Pablo says; and because “as where fear abounds, hope abounds all the more” -Pope Francis says.

President Trump read from the script of his inaugural address to great applause, "We will not forget our God." And then, he added an unscripted side remark: "Can't do that." He is entirely right. In the books of Samuel, whenever David consults the will of God, he makes wise decisions. The American one dollar bill has the inscription *Annuit Coeptis*, it is: "He has blessed our undertaking", and this is true.

In his January 20 message, the Holy Father said, to President Trump, to offer "prayers that Almighty God will grant you wisdom, strength and protection in the exercise of your high duties." In addition to these prayers, the Catholic Church can provide practical advice on how to apply wisdom and strength. In another inaugural aside, President Trump said, "It's all common sense." The Catholic Church is a repository of common sense. We have a lot of history. Donald Trump is the 47th president; Pope Francis is the 266th successor of St. Peter. When George Washington was the first president, we were already on our 250th Vicar of Christ. We can offer the third pillar after tradition and the Gospels: The Catholic Social Magisterium. After this long introduction, I would like to detail Pope Francis's contribution to that magisterium under the framework of Organizing Hope.

As Secretary of the Latin American Pontifical Commission, my challenge is "to take care of the life and development of the particular Churches of Latin America, in collaboration with the other dicasteries of the Holy See." This is the Article 111 of the New Constitution of the Roman Curia, *Praedicate Evangelium*; but the first article of that Constitution tells us "how" to evangelize: "With words and gestures, touching the suffering flesh of Jesus Christ in the people." This indicates that the catholic social ministry must put its hands to work in concrete reality, and we can do it because we have the supernatural help of grace through theological virtues: faith, hope and charity. Without this divine help, bridges cannot be built.

However, building bridges (that is my challenge and my job) soupooses, in addition to the help of grace, organizing community between the particular American Churches, from North to South, and from South to North, because our People (migrants) at the end are pilgrims of hope. And to build bridges it is possible because the three Americas have a long tradition in organizing communities -it is: organizing communities, popular movements, union workers, ecclesial networks, chambers of businessmen or educational networks-. As we can see, the discarded people know very well that salvation supposes communitarian organization; on the contrary, they died. Communitarian organization means "unity in difference", and that knowledge as a continental reality is the start point of a catholic social ministry.

Sister and brothers, as the threats to life are no longer localized in one country, neither in one subcontinent, but across an entire continent, the unity in differences must link the three Americas, so: "Either we unite or we sink" -as Pope Francis says. So that, it is necessary to build bridges of inclusion, reconciliation and fraternity that can connect these organized communities existing in ours Americas, in order to begin together processes of just transition, respecting the differences of each particular Churches.

We can do it, because we are united by the theological virtues: faith, love and hope. But, sadly, we are also united by: different language, migration, theft of natural resources, extractivism of critical minerals, private prisons, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and so many problems that can only be solved by addressing their causes. In the Latin American catholic church, we connect hope with the economy, and we call it “socio-environmental ecology”. That’s why, in Latin American, Catholic Social Ministry is at the same time an organizing community around political and economical problems. But we call it with other names: Eclessial Network (as REPAM), Popular Movements, or simply Organizing Community.

In other words, we are not only united by faith in the same Triune God, by love for our Lord Jesus Christ and his Holy Mother Mary, and by hope for eternal life. Sadly, we are also united by fear, the contrary of hope. There are millions of people who: have faith in God, but have lost confidence in the community; love God, but have lost the capacity to love the humanity; hope for eternal life, but have lost hope in “a good and abundant life for all,” for which Jesus Christ came, as he himself tells us in the Gospel of John, 10:10.

These three theological virtues, faith-hope-love, are a gift from God that makes us “an army without weapons,” -as Francis said in his Letter to the Popular Movements during Holy Week 2020-. How is this? At the community level: faith must be translated into trust in the community; love must be translated into social justice to guarantee a dignified life, universal access to goods, solidarity and subsidiarity; and hope must be translated into organization.

There we have connected, in the plane of Catholic Social Ministry, the three points of the theological method that allows the Social Teaching of the Church to advance by giving human responses at every historical moment: seeing from the faith; discerning from the Gospel; and acting in communion.

At the last Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, Francis told us: “The PCAL must build bridges of inclusion, reconciliation and fraternity,” and in response to this request from the Holy Father, we are building bridges to connect the three Americas. Under the leadership of Cardinal Prevost, we are building three bridges across the Americas: 1) bridges of inclusion through organized universities; 2) bridges of reconciliation through organized workers and entrepreneurs; 3) bridges of fraternity through organized dioceses (it is CELAM and USCCB).

But: how do we build a bridge? The first thing is to have a solid foundation that can support the weight of the load that moves over the bridge. That solidity is what we call solidarity, it is one of the four principles of the Social Doctrine of the Church. But solidarity

is the result of organizing community; it is not an individual act. Solidarity requires the personal decision to unite in order to be saved, and then, along the way, we see which was the strategy that made possible “a good and abundant life,” as our Lord Jesus Christ tells us.

This unity is out of pure love: “being one, as the Father is one.” And, at the same time, that is faith and hope. It is not necessary to unite with those who think like us; on the contrary, it is about “unity in difference,” because hope is the dynamo that mobilized us. It is the unity that emerges from love as a theological virtue. This unity is pure grace. It is not a political unity, but allows us to arrive at it. That is why the common good is unity, to be as one, because what is common is unity, that is why we call it community. We are not doing politics, we are doing through politics -as “the highest form of charity”-, the kingdom of God.

The Catholic Church is unity, and the solutions it offers to social problems are neither political nor economic, they are evangelical; the whole Gospel calls for unity. Far from social antagonism, we Catholics preach unity in difference as the path to salvation. That is our contribution to politics in the chaos that every change of era generates.

When this unity is embodied as solidarity, an organized community emerges, which seeks the mechanisms to guarantee two other principles of the Social Teaching of the Church: human dignity and universal access to created and developed goods. To do this, the organized community will dialogue with everyone. That is -as Francis says in *Fratelli Tutti*-: “the best politics” that, as “the highest form of charity”, seeks to guarantee social, economic and ecological justice.

The best policy, says *Fratelli Tutti*, is “social dialogue,” which is not between friends but between parties in conflict, willing to put it on the table in search of an open agreement. However, social dialogue is not possible if there is no first an organized community at the end of each part of the bridge by which communication passes in the form of negotiation . That is why it is important to learn negotiation techniques, and for this, the Catholic Social Ministry has a lot to teach from the Workers Ministry.

Social dialogue is the best tool that has been developed to guarantee social peace, but it presupposes organizing hope. The social dialogo must be between communities, not between individuals. However, in a world of shadows, as Chapter I of *Fratelli Tutti* says, where people where are afraid, because they are isolated, locked up to then take from them the last thing they have left, hope, through “false mystics of communitarian salvation,” there, social dialogue will not be possible, and the result will be the worst politics.

This is why Latin American popular movements are an organizing community that manifest themselves in public spaces as a new mode of democratic politics. Public spaces are

the only space left to them after being excluded from the world of work. Unity is a social practice, not just a discourse. That is why Pope Francis says, in *Fratelli Tutti*, “the great theme is work,” because it creates spaces for communication between people and makes it possible to organizing hope, not for food but for dignity across all life.

Returning to the three theological virtues, we must keep in mind, as Francis told us, that they are our supernatural weapons to take care and save creation in a world of shadows, such as the one we inhabit in every change of era where false religion takes the place of politics.

However, the Enemy (with a capital E, that is the evil, which is not a person) prevents the unity that makes community organization possible. The evil -which always appears under the guise of good-, takes the hope of isolated persons and organizes the hope into the contrary direction.

Today we can see that a pseudo-religious narrative replaces Catholic Social Teaching. However, in isolation: 1) solidarity and subsidiarity cannot be realized; 2) human dignity is threatened; 3) and the Enemy organizes hope.

Just looking at the latest presidential campaign around the world, we can understand why it is necessary to return to an embodied communication, to organizing community as “communitarian salvation mystic”.

That is why Francis, in the changing of the epoch, tells us “not to let our hope be stolen from us,” and calls us, the Catholics, to organizing hope. But how can we do it? We all know the four principles of *Evangelii Gaudium*: reality is greater than the idea; the whole is greater than the part; unity is greater than conflict; time is greater than space. This last principle is expanded by Francis in his dialogue with the students in Africa with a fifth principle: organization is greater than time. This is the Church, a loving organization that, by the grace of God -that is, by the theological virtues-, subsists in time beyond the spaces of power; overcomes the division that causes conflict between the parties; maintains unity in difference without stopping at conflict; and desacralizes ideologies built outside the suffering flesh of Christ in the People. For all this, the Catholic organizing community is greater than political time. That is why it is enough to start processes, because others will follow. The poor know this, because they start the process with the hope that their children will have a more dignified life. They know that the organization conquers time. This is the Church of the borders.

Why does Pope Francis call us to organize hope? Because hope is never lost, but it can be manipulated. Hope can be politically manipulated. Carefull!!! When we do that, we

are not doing theology, but ideology; and that is the worst politics. Therefore, we must go out as Church, but build bridges of communication, without leaving anyone outside or behind. People isolated will be manipulated through hope.

Let us not be afraid! Fear is a natural passion that we must transform into a communitarian organization -dice Francisco in the II Discourse to the Popular Movement-. Otherwise, alone, we will easily be paralyzed. Pope Francis calls us to be apostles, which means to move forward without fear. Ultimately, this is the path to holiness, and the history of the Church is full of saints, “the saints of the next door”, as Francis calls them in *Exultate Evangelium*. We have a jubilee year to walk together as pilgrims of hope, from North to South and from South to North.

“Dear brothers and sisters, let us never forget that hope does not disappoint! Hope never disappoints! Hope is like a rope anchored on the shore that we cling to; it never disappoints”.

S.S. Francisco, Roma, 25 de Enero 2025